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SUBJECT: DISPUTED ST. PETERSBURG MUNICIPAL ELECTION SEAT SAGA
CONTINUES

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1. (SBU) Summary: Controversy continues to surround St. Petersburg's March 1 municipal elections. In the city district of Morskoy Okrug, a local court cancelled the allegedly forged final election figures which deprived Yabloko candidate Boris Vishnevskiy of his apparent victory. But, Vishnevskiy has not yet secured his seat on the council. The Municipal Election Commission has decided instead to nullify ALL results in the five-seat district where Vishnevskiy was running, and hold a new election. As the other four winners in the disputed district are members of the United Russia party, it is possible that the government is ready to sacrifice four party loyalists in order to keep a single oppositionist out of office - or that it is confident about winning or ensuring victory in the fifth seat. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On March 1, Boris Vishnevskiy, a well-known reporter and member of Yabloko, ran for a seat in the Municipal Council of Morskoy Okrug in St. Petersburg. Vishnevskiy competed in a five-seat election district, initially won a slot, and was issued a copy of the official election protocol confirming the vote count results and showing his victory. The next morning, however, Vishnevskiy was shocked to learn that the Municipal Election Commission had amended the figures and moved him down the list and into the losers' category. Vishnevskiy was thus deprived of a municipal seat, and the newly vacant slot was awarded to United Russia member Anton Chumachenko (reftel).

3. (SBU) Vishnevskiy won a civil case on the matter on May 19. The court ordered the Municipal Election Commission to recount votes in Vishnevskiy's district and also to exclude the figures from one of the six polling stations, as the validity of that station's results were in doubt. Vishnevskiy's victory in court thus seemed to open his way to a council seat. The opposition has stressed that this decision was a rare example of the government admitting election fraud and agreeing to accept a legal ruling. Even Chumachenko agreed that there had been fraud, and that the disputed seat rightly belonged to Vishnevskiy rather than to him.

4. (SBU) Recent developments in the ongoing affair, however, have proved that Vishnevskiy may have celebrated prematurely. Reportedly at the behest of the City Election Commission, the Municipal Election Commission decided, before recounting the votes as per the court's instructions, to first reconsider two previous election result complaints which had originally been denied. These complaints were filed shortly after the day of the election by another candidate, Galina Baranova, who questioned the results from two other polling stations in the same district.

5. (SBU) The Municipal Election Commission agreed with Baranova, and ordered a recount of the votes cast in the two polling stations she disputed. The recount in one of the two stations unexpectedly added 14 votes to Chumachenko's total, while the recount of the other polling station's vote turned out to be impossible as the ballots had been destroyed by a hot water leak, according to a report from the district administration.

6. (SBU) As a result, the Municipal Election Commission decided to cancel all of the district's election results, thereby

excluding all five election winners in the district from the Council due to a requirement in the election law that district election results be cancelled if the results of more than twenty-five percent of the polling stations are cancelled (two polling stations of six were cancelled in this case).

¶7. (SBU) Vishnevskiy calls this situation a farce, and others second his opinion. Chumachenko f has said that the fourteen additional votes recently added to his score appeared out of nowhere. Vasiliy Barkanov (United Russia), the Chairman of the Budget Committee of the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly, believes that the ongoing machinations of the Vasileostrovskiy District Administration, which oversees Morskoy Okrug, are causing undue expense to the city by forcing yet another election in the disputed district.

¶8. (SBU) Vishnevskiy attributes his election troubles to St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko's unwillingness to let him win. He notes that Aleksandr Isayev, the Vasileostrovskiy District Administrator, is both a member of United Russia and a political appointee of Governor Matviyenko's. Vishnevskiy will continue the legal battle for his seat. He also hopes the four United Russia winners from the disputed district will challenge the Municipal Election Commission's decision as it annulled their victories as well.

GWALTNEY